

# Comment Owen Logan

ART  
WORKERS  
KISS  
ASS

So says *Art Work*, a freesheet newspaper and accompanying website recently produced from the United States. Sadly, artists kiss ass incessantly and much more than the authors of the workers' slogan above might admit. Forget flattering portraits, forget too the wholesale renaissance of pictorial conceits in the era of Photoshop. From exhibiting urinals to canning shit for sale, from having bricks lugged around for loads of money to toying with sex and death as if each were a novelty and, by generally making a spectacle of themselves, artists are experts in kissing ass and making it look more like an insult. Why this should be so, in some people's eyes at least, lies in the old issue of who's paying the piper? Others will cry foul at such a vulgar materialist point. Well, there's nothing vulgar about it. The transformation of that supremely unethical thing – money – into a philosophical commodity – art – is nothing if not a sophisticated process of particular benefit to the various private and public buyers of cultural capital. At government level, for example, the establishment of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) in the USA in 1965 was, according to one of its greatest supporters, all about “transforming the world's impression of the United States as a nation of money-grubbing materialists.” Even the puritan crusader Ronald Reagan and his conservative allies who had tried and failed to abolish the NEA ended up drawing it closer to government. But what about our brother and sister ‘art workers’ in the United States who have resolutely turned away from the rearview of the rich in favour of organising themselves and possibly reconfiguring the means of cultural production too? How have they risen to such an unusually upstanding position in an ass kissing system?

As a skeptical reader might expect, the artistic escape from ideological drudgery is more reminiscent of a word game than “A NATIONAL CONVERSATION ABOUT ART LABOUR AND ECONOMICS”, which is what *Art Work* ambitiously proposed. Sadly, this conversation has begun by ignoring the dire state of trade unionism or the problems of representing labour. *Art Work*'s general drift is towards the sort of self-help and networking between the like-minded affinity groups that make up today's ‘new social movements’.<sup>1</sup> Although the language of class is used in a publication like *Art Work*, its analysis has been so impoverished by social movement rhetoric that one might think that Karl Marx never managed to put pen to paper or got anyone to think about how power works and where actual strength might be found. The predictable result of such amnesia about political economy is that the forces of democracy have, quite literally, been flattened.

Today one could reasonably suppose that demonstrations were just as important as strikes and that strikes and industrial actions are a sort of cultural phenomena belonging to a decaying or marginalised social identity (i.e. the working class) and that all sorts of self-organised activity are equally relevant to a politics of resistance, and finally, perhaps, that legality is merely a bourgeois oddity rather than a point of struggle. It may be true that the worst conceptual flattening of the contours of resistance by the dogma of postmodern academics is now over. But it still seems delusional, patriarchal, workerist or perhaps just absurdly nostalgic to think about the shock troops of the working class when (to take an example from *Art Work*) an artist opens a café and ponders ‘Small Business as Artistic Medium’, and this sort of lifestyle report appears integral to some supposedly transformative politics. When Barbara Ehrenreich (author of *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*) called a few years ago for a more practically-minded left politics to meet everyday needs in the US, she must have had something more substantial in mind than this. One can't help suspecting that the most inflated postmodern trends in cultural studies have somehow turned into the mores of new social movements.

The abiding fascination in the UK with the National Union of Mineworkers defeat under Margaret Thatcher is suggestive of a different, albeit dormant, set of radical priorities. But it would appear that any residual hopes for some sort of strategic democratic agency have been ghosted away. Less by Thatcher's victory than by a combination of sharp-suited trade union bureaucrats and university-educated political entrepreneurs of social movements. Unless they are connected by some dwindling party affiliation these two types rarely meet, but between them they seem to have made strategy into the object of some sort of post-Stalinist nostalgia industry leaving a new generation to think about the interpretation of contemporary history much more than its making. Although acting independently, their impact in unions and movements is interconnected and broad; on the one hand the meaning of solidarity and equality (in trade unions) has narrowed while, on the other, it has been displaced by the language of identity and a politics of recognition (in social movements). It may be too early to say, but the overwhelmingly defensive response to market failure at the highest levels of capitalism is suggestive of the powerlessness both cadres have helped to inscribe in public consciousness.

These are surely the self-defeating circumstances in which Gordon Brown took up the idea of the Tobin Tax for a few weeks this year only to drop it as if it had no political constituency at all. This levy, intended to discourage predatory speculation in international financial transactions, has long been proposed by ATTAC and the global justice movement more broadly, yet there is still no grass roots constituency behind the idea, even at a time when cash-strapped local authorities are racing towards speculative borrowing as the solution to their woes.<sup>2</sup> In fact Brown's first supporter on this tax policy came in the unlikely form of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Moreover, it was argued on BBC news that governments might be attracted to this international tax because it could be decided upon above the heads of national electorates. On this dismal account of democratic capacities we would seem to believe it when we're repeatedly told that taxing capitalism is counterproductive. Nevertheless, a global tax on speculation would be a step in the right direction though not a substitute for the sort of corporation taxes which are also required. Who knows what mauling the mechanics of the Tobin Tax would receive at the inter-governmental level or what comprehension it would receive at a national level; how many people know what it is, how it could work as well as how it could be used as a diversion from the underlying issue of progressive taxation?<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, the monopolists of the financial universe are against the Tobin tax its cause has been taken up by celebrities who, even when they are not political foils, make for a very poor opposition to the power elite. If the ruling class has its way with the Tobin Tax, now being dubbed the “Robin Hood Tax”, it will be because the cadres of the left have lost theirs to no small degree.

## Servicing or Organising?

When artists league together as workers they usually conform to what in contemporary trade union parlance is a ‘servicing union’. Under neoliberalism the ethos of servicing has spread through unions that increasingly operate more like professional associations which management consults and negotiates with at a high level leaving the union officials the task of informing their members. Too often these unions offer members little more than fringe benefits rather like a company would offer perks and incentives to customers or employees. The harder path for all concerned is building an organising union which, ideally, listens to members and responds by asking questions intended to expand the terms of discussion, participation and action. Essentially,

the more militant ethos is all about winning against employers, not going into an opaque governing partnership with them. Needless to say winning has never been easy, but perhaps it is a little easier if we recognise that the earth is not flat and just as capital has its contours and niches so does labour.

Key victories or successful mobilisations might be compared to crater holes on a battlefield that get taken over by opposing forces. Nonetheless, they have lasting uses and help create relationships which appear to ripple along in the wake of an impact. For instance, the large 1995 transport workers' strike against social security reform in France fed into an apparently 'miraculous' wave of activism three years later when the unemployed, migrants, students and others took to occupying public buildings.<sup>4</sup> Similarly the 1994 pro-democracy strike by oil workers in Nigeria is justifiably regarded by trade unionists there as the closest thing to armed struggle on a national level in a fatally divided nation. But against such expressions of workers' power, civil society almost everywhere is deeply permeated by neoliberal governmentality, articulated not only by servicing unions, but also through an extraordinary proliferation of NGOs, (Non-Governmental Organisations), GONGOs, (Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations) and BONGOs, (World Bank Organised Non-Governmental Organisations) not to mention any number of foundations and think tanks. In general terms, all support the liberal right to have rights while often denying or discouraging substantive democratic rights like the right to strike. Consider the case of an Indian GONGO devoted to the cause of women's empowerment that sacks its women workers for unionising. George Orwell's predictions of a world of doublespeak have been fulfilled.

### What comes next?

When labour politics are abstracted and disempowered by the dynamics of neoliberal governmentality and basic insincerity, one also has to wonder if the last great avant-garde idea of collapsing art into life is not a double-edged sword, curtailing strategy and tactical thinking while advancing a more pleasurable politics of expression. Another recent publication, *Understanding Social Welfare Movements*<sup>5</sup>, does not concern art *per se* but reading against the grain of some aspects of social movement discourse gives a good sense of a new Left-leaning social aesthetics that is gregarious but not necessarily collective in any substantial sense. Take the following passage:

"Many social movements when they first appear often have the character of surprise about them. In this sense, social movements are quite literally astonishing. Dull tedious reality is enlivened and energised by mobilisations and protest. Social movements stand out from the banal background of everyday life. The plain excitement of being with others in public displays of collective togetherness temporarily tears a hole in the fabric of the taken-for-granted, atomised nature of reality."

If this also looks very like the avant-garde's culture war continued by other means, the question which should be asked is why, if the avant-garde ethos failed to emancipate the arts in the 20th century, should it do any better in emancipating politics in the 21st? A realist perspective, recalling the historical paradoxes of the avant-garde and its tendencies towards false conceptual unities would point to it as part of the problem, not part of the solution to an atomised reality. Certainly, avant-gardism carried over to the wider political arena does not mean that its political crisis and failure is somehow dissolved. Indeed, it is much more likely to be reconstituted and resurrected. As the French authors of 'The New Spirit of Capitalism' argue "the artistic critique" of capitalism in their country became a key element in the renewal of what it opposed.<sup>6</sup>

The everyday experiences (and self-actualising expectations) of work were liberalised with the effect of strengthening capitalist power. Are we seeing this move being carried over in the diffusion and flattening out of anti-capitalist politics as (and perhaps *because*) hypermobile and largely fictive capital makes it all the harder to grasp the means of production?

The authors of *Understanding Social Welfare Movements* emphasize how mass events like those that occurred in Seattle in 1999 only seem "to defy the laws of gravity" and are in fact based in unspectacular and frustrating pre-histories of patient and routine activism. In this respect it's worth recalling that although artists may have adapted to servile forms of trade unionism and what's been called the "tyranny of structurelessness"<sup>7</sup> in social movements, their search for a political home has not always been so defeating. And here credit must go to Nicolas Lampert, a contributor to the *Art Work* paper, for taking a long view and going back to the activities of artists during what economists, such as Paul Kruger, call "the great compression" of the 1930s when US society was largely equalised by

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New Deal policies. This equalisation was greatly driven by a militant trade unionism which grew exponentially during the inter-war period in the US. Before they were once again reined in by corporatism during the Cold War, unions were very much at the heart of a broader social movement which lent support to the second phase of the New Deal from 1935 which favoured small farmers and organised labour. Mindful of the growth of Fascism and its defeat of organised labour in Europe, US 'New liberals' shared in the recognition that the strike weapon was vital and that trade unionism required practical support.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, while top-down economic protectionism proved disastrous in the 1930s and led into the outbreak of war, bottom-up protectionism laid the conceptual basis for a genuinely social market, even more relevant in today's circumstances of 'social dumping' and international divisions of labor.

Although *Art Work* does not cover this ground it does remind us how, in the New York of the 1930s, artists were strategically conscious and played an important part along with the National Maritime Union by aiding strikes in other sectors. Organised in militant fashion in their own sector, the Artists Union also won on issues such as censorship, funding and institutional autonomy from business and State, no doubt earning the respect of other workers. However, in recalling this period it is easy to romanticise reciprocal relationships between unions and other interlinked groups which were far from horizontal or tension free. An organisation like the New York Photo League originally set up as the Film and Photo League to aid workers' actions turned into an avenue of individual upward mobility to the point where politics could be seen by some members as something of a distraction from the somehow more serious business of photography and art. Given that the League's photography was at the same time becoming increasingly technocratic and institutionalised

one might well argue that they got their priorities wrong. Either way, the erosion of its original purposes served to dislocate photographers from broader realist debates, and the shift away from thinking about culture as a whole did not help the League when it was targeted as a communist front organization and forced to close in 1951.

In contrast to the warm spectacle of collectivism that "enlivens dull tedious reality" today there was, in the period of the New Deal – and surely there still needs to be – a meritocracy of militancy. It is the sibling rivalry between unions that earns them political capital and can contribute to the overall bargaining power held by a labour movement. In the context of the New Deal this political capital also belonged to a much wider social movement. Among its currents were a plethora of anti-capitalist groupings in support of progressive taxation. Although the link between trade union militancy and a broader public consciousness in favour of progressive taxation might appear an obvious one, it is often missed out in tireless rationalistic studies of inter-union rivalry or in those studies which assume that wages are the key measure despite the fact that only part of the work force is ever unionised. Not only should it be assumed that this will always be the case but it should be more obvious that trade unionism does not need to have great coverage to be the key countervailing force against capitalist oligarchy and a State locked into the logic of capital accumulation. France, with a relatively small trade union membership, is an example of the effectiveness of philosophically-loaded organising unions. As much as Nicolas Sarkozy may want to perform Thatcherism in France it is very doubtful he can achieve the scale of his ambitions, a problem perhaps signaled by his sudden support for the Tobin Tax.

Elsewhere, elephantine servicing unions, often brought about by merging unions with dwindling disillusioned memberships, have perpetuated corporatist social partnership policies. Although partnership approaches are now looking shaky, big unions continue to gain places at the negotiating table whether or not they have really earned those places politically. In this respect, they offer up perfect opportunities to employers and politicians to go through the polite rituals of fake consultation and bargaining with a toothless adversary. A 'fall back position' is a classic trade union contingency but the partnership ethos is instead sustained by ideological trade-offs that allow all sides to behave as if there were no opposing interests to be defined. This is rarely only a matter of employers versus employees, and in culture especially, the distinction of public and private interests, as well as the varying conditions of workers, freelancers and volunteers all point to fundamental faultlines. Surely the ideological trade-off in this context is to join in with neoliberal governmentality and carry on as if the administration of culture is a modern form of rainmaking. Sadly this myth has only been partly exploded.<sup>9</sup>

Such short sighted approaches are certainly not confined to big unions. In Scotland we have seen small servicing-style unions like the Scottish Artists Union or the Society of Authors (which conceives of itself as a union) engaged in the political process without possessing any real political capital – a problem which these unions need to face up to if more democratic codes of conduct can be agreed upon, as they should be. When weak unions or associations follow the logic of the lobbying and public relations industries the outcomes are predictable. As anyone might have guessed from the outset, politicians and businessmen have done just as they pleased in driving to commercialise culture in Scotland, suborning a UNESCO treaty in the process. The rationale for establishing Creative Scotland, "an entrepreneurial organisation" set to supersede the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, has changed so many times that far from being an indictment, doublespeak was more like a badge of courage for Mike Russell



MSP, the last in a series of culture ministers to mangle the basic terms of reference beyond all meaning. Despite an empirical association with underdevelopment and poverty, and regardless of its suitability, entrepreneurialism is being pushed in everywhere.<sup>10</sup> Mike Russell's successor Fiona Hyslop MSP comes fresh from doing the same confusionist job in education, to where, he has now gone.

At the eleventh hour there are still no guarantees of anything which artists, writers and other creative 'stake-holders' wanted to protect from the new regime. Used by politicians and bureaucrats in Scotland, the word 'culture' now seems to be nothing more than a signpost to voodoo economics.<sup>11</sup> The expectations built up for creative industries, transferable skills, national and municipal branding are considerable, but they have little foundation. All are potential avenues to the great goal of "international comparative advantage."<sup>12</sup> Beware anyone who takes universal principles seriously and thinks that cultural policy should have more to do with ways of life and freedom and equality in communication, and, worse still, might want to point out that culture is instead being used to dress up a shoddy economic policy based on a fundamentally misconceived goal that can only re-enforce dependency and international divisions of labour. All that said, the looming defeat of anyone entertaining such thoughts has been largely self-inflicted. It could not have occurred without servicing unions that failed to question the real meaning, and just as importantly, the process of cultural policy under neoliberalism. The small unions of artists and writers have been left in the lurch while the elephantine Unite union failed to defend the skill base of the Scottish Arts Council. How many of its jobs will be surplus to the requirements of a new 'entrepreneurial organisation' is still not clear, as with so much else about Creative Scotland.

Whatever the shortcomings of the Scottish Arts Council, and there are many, the organisation is a result of the arms length principle which – as the means to defend culture from government – has been a historic key to cultural policy. This principle ought to have been defended more vigorously by all concerned against an un-mandated attack by politicians and their cronies in business and consultancy. Had staff at the Scottish Arts Council acted with more courage in this respect they might be in a better position today and the public would not be faced with the prospect of paying for corporate friendly cultural nationalism, hardly a fair substitute for the broad public interest when it comes to cultural policy.

## The Last Straw

"Transforming the world's impression of the United States as a nation of money-grubbing materialists", as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. put it, required an arms length organisation like the National Endowment for the Arts. In reality, the NEA, like the Arts Councils in the UK, has been held closer to the political establishment than the arms length doctrine suggests. But this is not a good reason for closing the political gap even more, or worse, closing one's eyes and ears and pretending it's not happening. It is happening. The consequences are already clear to Variant as witness to the rise of official culture in Glasgow and associated forms of censorship. It would seem that Scotland's fate is to have failing economic policies derived from the United States conducted by our own politicians who, ironically, can do nothing but reinforce the impression of Scotland as a nation of money-grubbers by falsely comparing the country to a corporate enterprise.<sup>13</sup> Our politicians do this at every opportunity. Scots have long participated in imperialism whilst feigning disdain but once the signs of nationalism get pinned on lapels, draped across chests, showcased on billboards and spotlighted in museums and galleries, then, as often appears in various countries, the crudest policies that

imperialists shrink from are perpetrated in the political equivalent of broad daylight. Only this class-ridden paradox explains how Scotland's unpopular politicians cannot see the benefit of cultural democracy as a cornerstone of socio-economic development. Instead they have, lazily, fixed their minds on cultural branding and cultural products thus haplessly guiding us towards the next economic dead end.

### Art Work

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### Understanding Social Welfare Movements

Jason Annetts, Alex Law, Wallace McNeish and Gerry Mooney, Published by Policy Press, Bristol

*We welcome your responses to articles and comment pieces that appear in Variant. We ask you to keep your comments brief (up to 750 words) and sharply focused. Send your responses to [variantmag@btinternet.com](mailto:variantmag@btinternet.com). If you wish a longer reply, please contact the co-editors.*

### Notes

1. *Understanding Social Welfare Movements* associates this politics of recognition and identity with social movements. The fundamental clash between 'old' and 'new' Left politics, i.e. rigidly structured parties and unions versus more loosely structured movements and networks, that was predicted by some utopian thinkers more than a decade ago has not occurred, thankfully. But signs of sincere and sustainable collaborations are few and far between. Boris Frankel (1987) offers an interesting perspective on this in his critique of new social relations that were assumed to be emerging as a replacement for conventional social democracy and State capitalism. See *The Post Industrial Utopians*, Polity Press, London.
2. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) schemes, derived from the United States, involve local government in a speculative logic when money is borrowed on the basis of projections of future tax revenues generated by urban regeneration and infrastructure projects.
3. For two divergent views available online visit: <http://www.thenewamerican.com/index.php/usnews/politics/2901-qtobin-taxq-and-un-global-taxman-making-a-comeback> and <http://www.web.net/~wfcnat/tobin.html>. Thank you to Mike Danson for alerting me to the possibility of another policy subterfuge in the style of Make Poverty History this time on the issue of the Tobin Tax.
4. This is recounted in *Understanding social welfare movements*, Jason Annetts, Alex Law, Wallace McNeish, Gerry Mooney, Policy Press 2009.
5. Ibid.
6. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, (2006) Verso, London
7. *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, Jo Freeman, 1970, *Variant* issue 20, <http://www.variant.org.uk/20texts/structurelessness.html>
8. It would not be an exaggeration to say that after Allied victory was achieved in 1945, liberal 'New Dealers' reverted *en masse* to the corporatist, business-friendly orientation of the first phase of the New Deal (1933-1935) geared towards recovery rather than reform. Basil Rauch's *The History of the New Deal* (1944, Creative Age Press) gives a good, almost contemporaneous, overview of the different forces at play during both phases. *The New Dealers, Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, Jordan A. Schwarz, (1994 Vintage Books) throws a more favorable light on the New Deal as a whole by concentrating on the legacy of an enlightened liberal technocracy which, Schwarz argues, advanced a generally beneficial State capitalist project up until the 1970s. For Schwarz, the Vietnam war and financial crisis appear to be the results of forgetfulness on the part of a post-war power elite rather than part of a social history that goes back to the problems of the New Deal itself.
9. Indeed the new variation of rainmaking has only been partly exposed for the myth that it is: 'Emerging Workers: a fair future for entering the creative industries', the Arts Group report, part-sponsored by the National Union of Students, is aimed at the taken-for-granted forms of exploitation and inequalities institutionalised within the creative industries. The sort of tedious exploitation that is so common in the sector is heavily glamourised in a Hollywood film like *The Devil Wears Prada* but ultimately the authors of a real life document find themselves in accord with the underlying ideological message of that movie, namely that the apparently trivial and overblown is not only underestimated but is in fact a serious industry in a globalised economy. This is a fraction of the really 'big idea' that post-industrial society is one which produces intangibles and intellectual properties in a global market. It's not so much that the National Union of

Students are shooting themselves in the foot by going along with these ideas, (articulated on p14 of the Arts Group report) they're shooting themselves in the head given that the knowledge economy ultimately spells the end of the rationale for public funding of higher education. See: <http://www.artsgroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/EmergingWorkersFinalWeb.pdf>

10. For more on this see 'The Progress of Creeping Fascism', *Variant*, Issue 35.
11. It was George Bush Snr. who originally used this term in 1980 to criticise Ronald Reagan's disastrous 'supply side' economic philosophy. In fact what became known as Reaganomics was little more than unbridled military Keynesianism, an industrial policy by the backdoor. Bush was left to deal with the consequences of massive public debt, disintegration and underdevelopment in 1988.
12. 'International comparative advantage' is a key term in government jargon. It is one of those utopian liberal concepts based on the ideal of free trade and it remains quite credible as long as one can believe, for example, that Sony is a truly international organisation, not a Japanese transnational, or that the United States does not engage in protectionism. For a liberal refutation of the same liberal idealism see 'No One Loves A Political Realist', by Robert G. Gilpin in *Realism: Restatements and Renewal*, Frankel, B. (ed.) 1996 published by Frank Cass, London. From a more radical perspective, however, the underlying economic issue of 'international comparative advantage' is that it breeds dependency on competitive interdependency and negates co-operation based on economic sovereignty and self-sufficiency.
13. This detracts from the dramatically different financial realities faced by nations and corporations, the most fundamental of all being that nations, unlike companies, cannot go bankrupt.